

Wellness Notes

Balance Problems*

(Part II)

Causes and Prevention

People are more likely to have problems with balance as they get older. Age is not the only reason these problems occur; there are other causes, too. Have you ever felt dizzy, lightheaded, or as if the room is spinning around you? These can be very troublesome sensations. If the feeling happens often, it could be a sign of a balance problem. Balance problems are among the most common reasons that older adults seek help from a doctor.

Some balance disorders are caused by problems in the inner ear. Others may involve another part of the body, such as the brain or the heart. Aging, infections, head injury, certain medicines, or problems with blood circulation may result in a balance problem.

The part of the inner ear that is responsible for balance is the labyrinth. When the labyrinth becomes infected or swollen, often through an ear infection such as otitis media, it can cause dizziness and loss of balance. This condition is called labyrinthitis. Upper respiratory infections and other viral infections, as well as stress, fatigue, allergies, smoking, or alcohol use, also can increase the risk for labyrinthitis.

Balance problems can also result from taking certain medications. For example, some medicines, such as those that help lower blood pressure, can make a person feel dizzy. Ototoxic drugs are medicines that damage the inner ear. Sometimes the damage lasts only as long as you take the drug; other times it is permanent. Some antibiotics are ototoxic. If your medicine is ototoxic, you may feel off balance. Check with your doctor if you notice a problem while taking a medication.

Diseases of the circulatory system, such as stroke, also can cause dizziness and other balance problems. Smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease increase the risk of stroke. Low blood pressure also can cause dizziness to occur.

Your diet and lifestyle can help you manage certain balance-related problems. By eating low-salt or salt-free foods, and steering clear of caffeine and alcohol, you can make symptoms less severe. Balance problems due to high blood pressure can be managed by eating less sodium, maintaining a healthy weight, and exercising.

The ear infection otitis media is most common in children, but adults can get it too. You can help prevent otitis media by washing your hands frequently. Also, get a flu shot every year to stave off respiratory infections. If you still get an ear infection, see a doctor immediately before it becomes more serious.

Do you take medication? If so, ask your doctor if your medicine is ototoxic, or damaging to the ear. Ask if other drugs can be used instead. If not, ask if the dose can be safely reduced. Sometimes it cannot. However, your doctor will help you get the medicine you need while trying to reduce unwanted side effects.